

One of the Greatest Health Threats to Your Pet

Nearly 60% of dogs and over 60% of cats suffered from this epidemic in 2022. The good news is you can do many things to reverse it, or even to avoid it altogether.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Results of the 2022 overweight/obese Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) survey are in; researchers estimate that about 59% of dogs and 61% of cats in the U.S. are overweight
- While some owners are simply unaware their pet is too heavy, others acknowledge the problem and feel anxiety about it
- Most veterinarians don't discuss the problem of overweight/obesity with their clients; of those who do, many have only misguided, uninformed advice to offer
- Obesity continues to be the greatest health threat to pets, in that it kills millions prematurely, creates immense pain and suffering, and costs tens of millions of dollars in avoidable veterinary expenses
- In 2024, parents of porky pets should throw out the carb-heavy processed diets, feed the right number of calories for weight loss, and implement a daily exercise routine

According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP), in 2022 in the U.S., 59% of dogs and 61% of cats were overweight or obese.¹ Just in case it needs saying, this is not good news.

The **2023 APOP survey** is underway, but sadly, there's little reason for optimism since the trend from the survey's inception in 2007 has been increasing rates of pet overweight and obesity year after year.

Some Owners of Fat Pets Are Oblivious, Others Are Anxious

APOP designated October 11, 2023, as World Pet Obesity Awareness Day to bring attention to this issue, because lack of pet owner understanding is the main reason for the problem. This is evidenced by the fact that in the 2022 survey, nearly one-third of owners of overweight or obese pets mistakenly believed their dog or cat had a normal or ideal body condition, despite veterinary assessments to the contrary.

For pet owners who are actually aware their pets are at an unhealthy weight, the situation can take an emotional toll. Purina Pro Plan Veterinary Diets conducted their own survey of over 600 U.S. pet parents whose dogs were overweight, and the owners reported high levels of anxiety about the situation. In fact, 88% admitted their dogs' body condition worried them, and 92% agreed weight loss would be beneficial.²

Unfortunately, knowing a pet is overweight and doing something about it can be quite challenging, in part due to owner anxiety. The Purina survey found that:

- 75% of owners agreed they feel guilty when their dogs seem hungry
- 67% agreed food is a primary source of their dogs' happiness
- 67% agreed they bond with their dogs by feeding them treats and don't want to lose that bond
- 54% agreed they feed their dog more food, table scraps or treats when their pet begs for them

Despite their fears about damaging their relationship with their pets, owners are aware of and troubled by weight-related behavior changes in canine family members:

- 92% of surveyed owners report they're sad when their dog can't participate in activities they previously enjoyed when their weight was ideal
- 45% indicate their dog has less energy for playtime, 44% say their dog tires easily after minimal activity, and 27% say their dog is less engaged or playful with their families

Most Veterinarians Aren't Good Animal Nutrition Resources

It seems logical that pet owners of too-heavy dogs or cats would consult their veterinarians about the issue, however, according to the APOP 2022 survey, only 49% of respondents had been approached by vet staff about their pet's unhealthy weight. And this isn't a new phenomenon — over the past decade of surveys, 46% to 53% of owners have consistently reported that veterinarians never mention their pet's weight.

There are many destructive forces at work that help create and maintain fat dogs and cats. As noted earlier, there are owners who either don't realize their pet is too heavy or aren't concerned enough to do something about it. And then we have around half the veterinarians in the country not even raising the subject with owners of overweight animals. Of those who do, the vast majority stick stubbornly to their misguided, uninformed advice to feed **ultraprocessed diets**.

If you're frustrated by your own veterinarian's lack of guidance, or poor guidance when it comes to your pet's diet, you should know that many veterinary schools gloss over the entire subject of small animal nutrition. They leave it up to a handful of major pet food companies to conduct seminars and provide nutrition resources for vet students that are heavily slanted toward the products they sell, which are solely lines of feed-grade, ultraprocessed pet food.

Sadly, after graduation, too few veterinarians attempt to fill in the significant gaps in their animal nutrition education, and those who do often decide to become board-certified veterinary nutritionists, which for most means winding up with financial ties to major pet food manufacturers.

Board-certified veterinary nutritionists are DVMs who complete additional training and receive a diploma from the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN), which is now a specialty within the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine. Once certified, veterinary nutritionists work in veterinary schools, government agencies, pet drug companies, private animal hospitals, for themselves, and very often, for pet food companies.

Major pet food manufacturers also frequently pay the tuition for DVMs studying to become veterinary nutritionists. So, when a veterinary nutritionist recommends X or Y or Z pet food, or discourages the feeding of raw or homemade diets, chances are he or she is obligated in some way to a pet food manufacturer that competes with fresh food diets.

This association creates an obvious conflict of interest when it comes to the advice and recommendations they offer, which means that for the time being, it's probably not a bad thing that very few veterinarians dispense — and very few pet parents look to their conventional vets for — nutrition advice.

Obesity Is the Greatest Health Threat to Pets

Overweight and obesity in pets is both a primary disease and the root cause of many other diseases that develop as the result of too much weight, including:

- **Arthritis**
- **Diabetes**
- Hypertension
- Hypothyroidism
- Kidney disease

And you can add to this list a significant reduction in the quantity and quality of your overweight pet's life.

I wish more pet owners understood the consequences of letting their dog or cat get fat. I find it hard to believe most would continue to overfeed, feed the wrong foods, and under-exercise their companion animals if they realized they were destroying their pet's health.

Dos and Don'ts for Keeping Your Pet at a Healthy Weight

The following are several of the recommendations I offer pet parents on the best way to prevent weight gain and help pets lose weight if necessary.

1. **DON'T feed a starch-heavy, carbohydrate-laden, ultraprocessed diet** — Ultraprocessed pet foods are a significant contributor to the pet obesity epidemic in the U.S. Many pet parents overfeed, but very often the problem is also the quality of food they're offering in addition to the quantity. If you're feeding kibble, while it might be free of grains, it can't be free of carbs, because carbs are necessary to form kibble.

If you look at the package label, you'll see potato, sweet potato, lentils, peas (pea starch), chickpeas, tapioca and/or other carbohydrate sources. Starch breaks down into sugar, even though you don't see sugar on the pet food package label. Carbs that aren't burned for energy are stored as fat.

Many dry pet foods are heavy in carbs (40 to 50% of total content in some cases), which can lead to blood sugar fluctuations, insulin resistance, obesity, diabetes and other health problems in pets. Carb intake above the daily needs of your pet (less than 10%) activates internal enzyme factors that go to work storing the excess as body fat.

Calculate the carbs in your pet's dry diet by adding up the moisture, fat, protein, fiber, and ash (estimate 6% if you don't see it listed) on the pet food label and subtract this value from 100: this is the amount of soluble carbs in your pet's diet (aka sugar).

2. **DO feed your pet fresh food** — Cats and dogs need food high in animal protein and moisture, with low to no grain or starch content (which is pretty much the opposite of what dry pet foods offer, especially grain-free kibble). A high-quality fresh food diet is the best choice for pets who need to lose weight. It's important to adequately nourish their bodies as weight loss occurs, making sure their requirements for key amino acids, essential fatty acids and other nutrients are met.

The key to healthy weight loss is to meet your pet's nutritional requirements through a balanced diet but feed less food (portion control) and encourage more exercise, which forces his body to burn fat stores. The first step is to transition him to a diet free of potatoes, corn, rice, soy, tapioca or any other vegan filler to get the carb content down to a biologically correct value of no more than 20% with a goal of less than 10% for healthy dogs and cats.

My best recommendation is a nutritionally optimal **homemade fresh food diet** of lean meats, healthy fats, plus fibrous vegetables and low glycemic fruits as the only sources of carbohydrates. These “healthy” carbs are the perfect way to maintain your pet’s microbiome, while providing fiber, antioxidants, and phytonutrients.

Homemade diets give you ultimate quality control over the ingredients going into your pet’s body. If you can’t prepare your pet’s meals, partner with a transparent company happy to discuss ingredient sourcing and quality control with you. You can also find lots of folks that will work with you to create a customized homemade fresh food diet for your pet at **Directory of Professional Fresh Pet Food Consultants**.

3. **DON'T free feed** — Also known as feeding ad libitum or the all-day all-they-can-eat buffet, this mistake by necessity goes hand-in-hand with a poor-quality diet, specifically kibble, because it's the only type of food you can safely leave at room temperature 24/7. Free feeding is the perfect way to wind up with an overweight or obese pet. In addition, a constantly available food source turns your **carnivorous hunter** into a grazer, which goes against her nature.

Wild cats and dogs are always on the move in search of their next meal; they are fasting and exercising in between meals. Many domesticated pets, on the other hand, are free fed. Many pets and people graze all day, which results in chronically elevated blood sugar, a constant demand for insulin (increasing the likelihood of insulin resistance), the over consumption of calories and circadian rhythm disruption.

A growing body of research on animal models demonstrates time restricted feeding (TRF) translates into healthier, longer-lived animals with fewer metabolic diseases.³ I have found this to be the cheapest and easiest way to create health, especially if you can’t feed an ideal, fresh food diet or maintain an ideal exercise schedule for your animals.

My suggestion is to aim for an 8-10 hour feeding window: feed your pet’s meal(s) and all training treats within 10 hours (with a 14-hour fasting period) which allows ample time for the body’s reparative and restorative processes to unfold, according to their inner biologic clocks.

We can’t sleep and eat at the same time or heal and digest at the same time and constantly stressing our pet’s bodies by going to bed on a full stomach translates into ongoing metabolic stress during the night. I recommend not feeding your pet within two hours of bedtime.

4. **DO challenge your pet at mealtime** — Separate your pet’s daily food allocation into several small portions and place them in different locations around the house for her to find. Make use of food puzzle toys for dogs and **indoor hunting feeders** for cats, which encourage hunting behavior and provide mental stimulation.

Also consider putting food bowls at the bottom and top of your staircase if you have one to encourage muscle-building and glucose-burning exercise throughout the day. While many people feed their pets twice a day, feeding just once a day actually offers a number of health benefits, including a lower risk of diabetes.

5. **DON'T follow pet food package feeding guidelines** — Most people who feed commercially available pet food follow the suggested feeding guidelines printed on the package, which often isn't the best approach unless the company has formulated the diet for adult, less active animals and has linked feeding instructions to the recipe formulation (most companies don't, so their feeding directions are incorrect).

Many recommendations use overly broad weight ranges such as "under 20 pounds" when clearly, a 15-pound dog requires significantly more calories than a 5-pound dog.

Package feeding instructions also use wide serving ranges, such as "feed 1/2 to 1 1/2 cups." These suggestions obviously don't consider, for example, an animal's activity level, and they tend to be short on other important details, such as whether "feed 1/2 to 1 1/2 cups" is a daily or per-meal guideline.

6. **DO feed your heavy pet to achieve weight loss** — Decide (with the help of your veterinarian, if necessary) what your dog's or cat's ideal weight should be. Then use one of the following formulas to calculate the precise number of calories to feed daily to get your pet down to his ideal weight and maintain it.

For example, let's say your canine BFF is 30 pounds and his ideal weight is around 22 pounds: **Daily calories (canine) = Body weight (kg) x 30 + 70.**

First, convert his weight from pounds to kilograms. One kilogram = 2.2 pounds, so divide his ideal weight (not his current weight) in pounds by 2.2. 22/2.2 means your dog's ideal weight in kilograms is 10. Now the formula looks like this: **Daily calories = 10 (kg) x 30 + 70.** And finally, it looks like this: **Daily calories = 370.**

This baseline number of calories is for very sedentary dogs and doesn't account for increased activity levels. If you feed your dog 370 calories a day, he should drop steadily to his ideal weight of 22 pounds and maintain it. Don't forget to include treat calories in this number, they add up quick.

Let's say your cat's ideal weight is a slender 12 pounds rather than her current weight of 16 pounds: **Daily calories (feline) = Body Weight (kg) x 30 + 70 x 0.8.** (The formula for cats includes a slight adjustment to account for the extremely sedentary lifestyle of most kitties these days.)

Her ideal weight of 12 pounds divided by 2.2 converts to 5.5 kilograms; now the formula looks like this: **Daily calories = 5.5 (kg) x 30 + 70 x 0.8.** And finally, it looks like this: **Daily calories = 188.**

7. **DON'T ignore your pet's need for exercise** — You'll never see a fat dog or cat in the wild because they follow their natural instincts, which includes the drive to be physically active. And while your Chihuahua doesn't behave or look much like her wolf cousins, she was designed to move like they do.

Given the opportunity and incentive, your little lap dog will walk impressive distances, hike, run, play, chase things, dig in the dirt, roll in the grass, enjoy every minute of it, and be healthier and happier for it. Only her humans, and possibly her too-heavy, uncomfortable body, are stopping her from being the little athlete she was born to be. How sad and unnecessary is that?

8. **DO make sure your pet gets daily aerobic exercise** — Consistent daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes (and preferably 60) of aerobic activity will help your pet burn fat and increase muscle tone. If you're unable to provide your dog with this much physical activity (and some dogs require even more), consider joining a pet sports club or doggy daycare. Another option is to hire a dog walker (or dog jogger, hiker, or biker).

If your pet is very overweight or obese, she may not be able to endure extended periods of exercise initially. Swimming is an excellent low-impact, gentle form of exercise for dogs who need to start out slow, as well as those with arthritis or mobility issues. Ask your veterinarian what exercises are safe for your pet to do, and which you either need to avoid or put off until she's in better condition. If you're dealing with a fat feline, check out **10 ways to help your cat exercise**.

9. **DON'T overfeed treats** — Treats — even very high-quality healthy ones — should make up less than 10% of your dog's or cat's daily food intake. It's also important to remember that treats aren't a complete form of nutrition and should never be used in place of nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate meals.

Overfeeding treats on top of daily food intake will result in an obese pet, and overfeeding treats while underfeeding balanced meals will result in nutritional deficiencies. Replacing highly refined store-bought treats with tiny tidbits of **pet-safe fresh fruits, veggies and lean meats** is a great way to cut calories and costs.

10. **DO feed tiny healthy treats on a very limited basis** — Limit treats to training and behavior rewards only. Again, keep treats at or fewer than 10% of your pet's daily food intake, which means offering very small pieces of healthy foods, very infrequently.

My favorite treats are berries, other fruits that can be cubed into tiny, bite-sized morsels (e.g., melons, green bananas, and apples), frozen peas and blueberries, and raw sunflower and pumpkin seeds (pepitas). The ultimate snack for dieting dogs is bone broth ice cubes.

Sources and References

¹ [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, 2022 U.S. State of Pet Obesity Report](#)

² [Purina News Center Press Release, October 11, 2023](#)

³ [Longo, V.D. et al. Fasting, circadian rhythms, and time restricted feeding in healthy lifespan. Cell Metab. 2016 Jun 14; 23\(6\): 1048–1059](#)
